

Story 2119 (1988 Tape 16)

Narrator: Ragıp Güngör, 75

Location: Aydın, capital of
Aydın Province

Date: January 21, 1988

Two Lazes¹ Learn About Rakı²

A Laz from the Black Sea coast of Turkey went to İstanbul to find a job with better pay than he was earning in Trabzon. This Laz was named Hızır.³ There were many Lazes like him who went to İstanbul for better jobs. Among

¹The word Laz referred originally to an ethnic minority living primarily in Trabzon and Rize provinces, along the extreme eastern part of the Turkish Black Sea coast. More recently the word has come to be applied to any resident of the entire Turkish Black Sea coast. In the Turkish oral tradition Laz people are stereotyped as being stupid or inept. This stereotype (like most others) is unjustifiable for Lazes are, of course, much like other people.

²Anise-flavored distilled liquor, known as arak in Arab lands and as uzu in the Balkans. Despite the fact that alcohol is forbidden by Islam, rakı remains a popular drink throughout the Middle East and especially in Turkey, where it is the national liquor. Mixed with water, it turns white, and its color plus its potency have earned for it the name "Lion's Milk."

³In anecdotes about the stereotyped Laz dummer, male characters usually have these five names: Temel, Dursun, İdris, Cemal [pronounced Jemal], and Hızır. Other Turks may also have these names but not with the high frequency that Lazes do. Temel and Dursun seem to be the most popular, and when either of these names appears in a folktale, most audiences sense that a Laz story or anecdote will follow.

Story 2119

them were men who became sailors, street peddlers, cooks, and tinsmiths. When Hızır arrived in İstanbul, he was recognized at once as a Laz by another Black Sea coast resident, a sailor. Hızır's Black Sea clothes revealed his origin immediately. The sailor called to him, "Hey, my brother, welcome to İstanbul. Aren't you from the Black Sea coast?"

"Yes, I am."

"From what part of the Black Sea coast?"

"I am from Trabzon," said Hızır.

They talked together for awhile, asking each other questions about themselves. After discovering that Hızır had no place to stay in İstanbul and still had no job, the sailor invited him to the house where he and some other Lazes lived. They were all single men who worked at various jobs in different parts of the city, but every evening they returned to their group home. When Hızır and the sailor arrived there, some of the men were preparing the dinner, some were setting the tables, and others were either playing kemençes⁴ or dancing to their music.

⁴A small musical instrument with three wire strings. It is played with a bow, like a violin--and there are those who consider the kemençe the ancestor of the violin. When being played, it is held on the lap, not under the chin. Played throughout Turkey, the kemençe is especially cherished in the Black Sea area.

Story 2119

The men who lived in that house always drank rakı with their evening meal, and there were several bottles of rakı on the tables. Hızır had never seen nor tasted rakı. When the sailor poured a cup of rakı and placed it before Hızır, that guest asked, "What is this?"

"They call it rakı, my friend," answered the sailor. "It makes you feel better about yourself."

Hızır smelled the contents of the cup hesitantly and then said, "İshak, my friend, it smells like dead bugs."

"Don't worry about that," answered İshak. "It will not harm you. Just drink it."

No longer able to ignore his friend's advice, Hızır drank the cup of rakı. Before long he asked for another cup, and by the time the meal ended, he had drunk four cups of rakı. It drove away his worries and made him feel relaxed. After he had repeated this drinking for several evenings, he became addicted to that alcoholic beverage. It reached the point where he could not get through dinner without a bottle of rakı.

After working in İstanbul for three or four years, Hızır had accumulated a good sum of money. He decided, therefore, that it was time for him to return home to

Story 2119

Trabzon. He had arrived in İstanbul wearing the clothes common in his part of Turkey: baggy trousers, a knitted woolen shirt, a scarf around his neck, and a pair of çariks⁵ on his feet. He decided, however, that it was now time to change his appearance and return home looking like a gentleman from İstanbul. He bought a completely new outfit: regular pants, a jacket, a white shirt, a necktie, and a new pair of regular shoes. In addition to these clothes for himself, he bought several pieces of fine fabric with which his mother could make garments for herself. After some thought, he also purchased a piece of luggage in which to carry home his possessions. Then he added to his purchases five bottles of rakı and packed them carefully among the other items in his

⁵Çariks were the footwear of rural Turks until the middle of the 20th century. The çarık is a sandal with a turned-up toe. It is made of camel skin or donkey skin. Initially a pair of çariks are identical, not one for the right foot and the other for the left. To fit them to one's feet, one must soak them in water for some time. After putting on very heavy socks, the owner must then tie the wet çariks tightly upon his or her feet. The çariks must not be taken off or even untied until they are completely dried, at which time one fits exactly the left foot and the other fits exactly the right foot. Most rural Turks now wear ordinary shoes, but in the interim between çariks and shoes many wore foot coverings made from the recycled rubber of worn-out automobile tires. The melted rubber was poured into left-foot and right-foot molds.

Story 2119

suitcase

Hızır arrived back in Trabzon three weeks later, and there he was welcomed by his mother and a small gathering of relatives. After hearing Hızır's account of his experiences in İstanbul, the relatives departed. His mother then questioned him about his success in İstanbul and about his health. She was aware that Hızır had changed considerably, and she wondered about that. "My son, what is in this new bag that you are carrying? What happened to the bag you took from here when you left for İstanbul?"

"That old bag was no longer suitable for a person of my status, and so I threw it away and bought a new one. It is called luggage."

His mother then asked, "What happened to your baggy trousers?"

Hızır answered, "People in İstanbul do not wear baggy trousers. They wear the kind of pants that I am wearing now. After I discovered this, I threw away the baggy trousers."

The mother asked no more questions after that. Realizing by then that her son had changed greatly, she decided not to question Hızır any further but to wait

Story 2119

until he volunteered more information about the ways in which İstanbul had affected him. Hızır understood the meaning of her silence. He therefore took from his luggage the pieces of fine fabric he had brought her. As she watched him unpacking that fabric, his mother noticed the five bottles of rakı. "What is in those bottles, my son?" she asked.

Hızır preferred not to tell his mother exactly what was in those bottles. He said instead, "Mother, these bottles contain medicine for my stomach."

"Have you been having problems with your stomach?"

"Mother, it may have been the water or the weather in İstanbul that bothered me, but right after I arrived in that city, I began to have stomach difficulties. I had quite a bit of pain with this illness. After it had continued for awhile, I visited a doctor, who prescribed the special water contained in these bottles. Fearing that my ailment might continue for awhile even after I got back here, I brought some of that special water along with me."

"Who was the doctor who examined you?"

"I don't remember his name," said Hızır, "but the pharmacy at which I bought this water was named Beşir Kemal." Everyone at that time had heard of this famous

Story 2119

pharmacy, and Hızır's mother was satisfied with that answer. She asked nothing more about the bottles. After some further conversation, the mother and son retired to their respective rooms for the night.

On the next day Hızır's mother wished to bake some bread, but she lacked flour and she also lacked firewood. She had a supply of wheat, but it had not yet been ground. Hızır took two bags of her wheat, loaded it on his mule, and took it to the gristmill. At noon he returned with two bags of flour. Then he set out again, this time to get some firewood. Taking an axe, a saw, and a length of rope, he rode his mule to the nearest forest

In the meantime, his mother spread a piece of canvas on the floor and poured one of the bags of flour upon it. She then took a fine sieve and began sifting that flour onto a dough tray. As she was sifting the flour, however, she began to experience some discomfort in her stomach. Soon her pain became unbearable, and she had to stop her work. She then remembered the stomach medicine which her son had brought home in five bottles. She did not know the name of that medicine, nor did she know how much of it to take. She guessed that a cupful of the liquid might cure her stomach disorder. Going to her son's room,

Story 2119

she got one of the bottles and poured from it a cupful of its contents. The liquid was so sharp and hot that it burned her mouth. But no matter how the liquid tasted and smelled, it gave her less discomfort than did her stomach ailment. With each cupful of rakı she experienced less and less pain. After a short while, she was able to continue her work. But the rakı also affected her body in other ways. Instead of sifting the flour onto the dough tray, she often sifted it onto the floor and onto her clothes. In her confusion she sometimes dropped the sieve

While this was going on, Hızır returned from the forest with a mule load of firewood, which he stacked by the fireplace. Going then to see his mother, he at once realized her condition. He asked, "Mother, what are you doing? Are you all right?"

She replied, "Can't you see that I am sifting flour?"

"I see that you are sifting flour, but you are mixing the sifted flour with the unsifted flour. Why don't you put all the sifted flour on the dough tray?"

"My son, since I drank the water from one of your bottles, Allah has doubled everything. The dough tray

Story 2119

has been so enlarged that I can sift either to the right side or to the left side and still have the flour land in the dough tray."